

Oceanside connection links family with Marine in Iraq

Nonprofit helps overseas troops see families

By: DANIEL ELY - For the North County Times

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OCEANSIDE ---- Benjamin Smith saw his son, Connor, for the first time Thursday, and his reaction was much like that of any new father.

"Hey there, dude," he said somewhat nervously to his new son, while laughing and smiling. Then to his wife, Raquel, "He's gorgeous, honey."

It's a scene that has been repeated millions of times over with new parents, except that Benjamin Smith is actually Cpl. Benjamin Smith, who is stationed in Fallujah, Iraq. The son, already 3 weeks old, was being held in front of a TV and camera connecting a quiet room in Oceanside to the Marines' Camp Baharia.



Raquel Smith holds her 3-week-old son Connor up to the camera so that her husband Marine Cpl. Benjamin Smith can see his son for the first time during a satellite video conference with her husband, who is stationed in Fallujah, Iraq with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, at the First Command Financial in Oceanside on Thursday. The family video conference was made possible by Freedom Calls, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing troops in Iraq and Afghanistan free video conferencing with their families, and First Command Financial, who provided equipment and space here in Oceanside.

HAYNE PALMOUR IV Staff Photographer

The video connection is the work of Freedom Calls, a donation-funded nonprofit that maintains satellite broadcast facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan, allowing troops overseas to contact their families free of charge. According to John Harlow, executive director and founder of Freedom Calls, AT&T has the exclusive rights to provide phone service to troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Providing state-of-the-art communication free of charge is the least that the American people can do to show their appreciation for the sacrifices being made by our soldiers and their families," Harlow said.

Video connections to troops in the combat zone were unheard of a generation ago.

"In 1976, when I joined (the Marines), the only thing we had was snail mail, and that took anywhere between two weeks and two months depending on how much you got moved around," said Doyel Price Jr., a financial adviser at First Command Financial in Oceanside, which has been hosting Freedom Calls conferences in its office for three years.

According to Price, though communications are now much faster, they're not always reliable. Outgoing e-mails from military bases are often stopped after an attack to prevent confidential information from being accidentally leaked, cutting off Marines and soldiers suddenly from their families while away from home.

Benjamin Smith is serving his second tour in Iraq and won't be home for another five months. Joking about an ill-fitting jumpsuit and being forced by his wife to wait until Christmas to open his presents, it seemed easy to forget the distance, especially since his family can see him instead of just hearing him.

"It makes so much of a difference knowing that he's seen his son," said Smith's wife, tearfully adding, "to just be able to see him while talking to him was more than I could ask. Without it, who knows if he would ever have had a chance."

More information about Freedom Calls can be found through their Web site at www.freedomcalls.org.